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NOTES AND COMMENTS.

I.

THE CLAIM OF "REALISM."

ONE of the most curious phases of our modern literature is the claim put forth in behalf of a so-called "school" of fiction, that theirs is the only literary art worthy the name, because they alone depict "real" life. For this reason they have arrogantly dubbed themselves "realists," while all those whose methods they disapprove are denounced as "idealists." The distinction which is attempted thus to be drawn is a purely fanciful one. The real difference lies deeper. The realist regards art as a means for producing uncomfortable, unpleasant impressions. He paints weakness, indecision, and pettiness; traces the growth of an unworthy sentiment or the aimless *ennui* of a purposeless existence, and says this alone is real life. He depicts suffering and cowardice, duplicity and despair, but omits hope, aspiration, and triumph. He says that the heroic is exceptional, abnormal, and, therefore, unreal; but weakness, self-distrust, and self-consciousness—these are universal, normal, real.

Heretofore, it has been deemed the highest art to contrast in fiction the good and bad, like light and shade in painting. Heroism has been a favorite theme, not only because it is a grand ideal, but because the world needs the stimulus of grand example. The good and the true have been depicted, not only because they are to be found in life, but because they are the best things to be found there, and it is desirable that one should contemplate, not merely a picture of the average life, as the average eye sees it, but also should apprehend the best life and the noblest, in contrast with the weakest, if not the worst.

Our literary "realism," so-called, has set up a false standard of the truth. Only the average, every-day, common-place happenings, it says, are true. They alone are "real," healthful, fit material for fictitious art. If the exceptional is used, it must be rendered gross, common, or repulsive. Who shall strike the average? Who shall say what is every-day life? Who shall separate the exceptional from the common-place?

But even if this might be done, the distinction is still a false one. The exceptional is just as much a part of truth as the common-place. But are heroism and truth and love exceptional? Is he that paints the portrait of beauty without emphasizing her imperfections any more an "idealist" than he who emphasizes her defects without depicting her beauty?

On the other hand, the "realist" strives to maintain his exclusive right to the claim that he is the only truth-teller in fiction by drawing a line betwixt himself and the so-called "naturalist." The real distinction may be stated in a sentence. The "realist" keeps to what he deems a middle course. He paints neither the highest good nor the worst evil. He keeps the middle of the street and never sees what is in the gutter. This, he says, is true—this is real life and everything else is false. The naturalist, on the other hand, believes in high lights and deep shadows. He is sometimes in the palace and anon in the gutter. Truth, he says, does not lie midway between extremes, but embraces the antipodes. The absence of vice or virtue is not life, but the union and contrast of them. So what the "realist" so carefully avoids, the "naturalist" paints with unflagging zeal. Nothing is too high or too low, too fair or too foul, for him. He paints vice in the nude and virtue in its loveliest colors. M. Zola is the type of the "naturalist"; Mr. Howells the head of the "realists."

Curiously enough, while our social and political, and, in a sense, our artistic ideals have been growing towards English in character, our criticism and our literary art have, in a certain diluted form, come to be French in their tendency. Based on the idea that life is essentially mean and petty, they proceed to accomplish their purpose of rendering it "interesting," not by an appeal to sympathy or emotion, nor by carefully wrought out dramatic action, but rather by a wonderfully intricate formulation of moral eccentricities. Each character is made a tangled mass of contradictions, while the climax is a combination of unpleasant incertitudes. That it is art, there can be no question—art of the same elaborate and painful character as a Chinese puzzle; art of the sort that should make angels weep, not because it inclines men to do evil, but because it does an infinitely worse thing in inclining them to do nothing.

As between our "realism"—so-called—and the naturalism of M. Zola, there is a curious kinship. Zola paints foulness in terribly truthful colors. The basest nature grows sick at his disgusting depictions. He scourges high and low with a putrescent lash; but he always scourges. He makes vice mean, unmanly, base, as it must be, and he does not forget that virtue is essentially noble, manly, true. He does not forget, either, that the lowest life may have elements of nobility appealing to the tenderest sympathy. This is his idea of truth, of nature—to paint the devil as foul as he is, in order that his very repulsiveness may strengthen the brave, true nature in manly purpose. His naturalism is so strong that it shocks, terrifies, and, sometimes perhaps, debases and overwhelms. It infects with a sense of foulness from which there is no escape. To the strong it brings a sense of disgusted pity; to the weak, perhaps, even its repulsiveness opens a door to temptation. But while it sometimes smutches the pure, it never omits the element of hope. Evil itself is in his view the incontrovertible proof of a possibility for good. Amid all his blackness, he is singularly careful not to forget that there is, or ought to be, light. If he depicts degradation so terrible as to make his reader cower and tremble with disgust and shame, he is sure to leave the impression that it is not incurable; that vice exists because harmful forces have usurped healthful lives, and that the responsibility for social evils does not rest altogether with their victims.

"Realism," on the other hand, never shocks with its pictures of evil and never charms with unexpected glimpses of virtue. Aspiration it esteems a thing ridiculous, and self-sacrifice an attribute to be ashamed of. Naturalism is a too terrible picture of too prevalent evils; "realism," a hopeless assertion of the universal absence of good. According to its philosophy, vice is, at the worst, only a little more positive form of the doubt and vacillation which constitute its flaccid ideal of virtue. The claim that it is a true picture of life is not a whit more defensible than that of the naturalist. Each paints life from the point of view he has himself selected, no doubt, with painstaking accuracy of detail. The claim of "realism," that the one is true and the other false, is absurd. No one can doubt the work of the naturalist,—as well question the revelations of the anatomist's knife. So far as it goes, it tells all there is to be told, while its assumptive rival does not dare speak the truth of any life, but follows a median line, where it guesses that the average of truth, good and bad, ought to be, and says this is truth; or, if driven from this, falls back on the "interesting" quality, and says that nothing else is artistic. Dark shadows and strong lights are not "interesting," but only mild half-tones, which it asserts are the only real truths it is permissible to use.

Upon the same principle, the "realist" declares that great events and notable acts of individuals, whether real or imaginary, are not fit materials for fiction, because not "interesting." In short, it teaches that the only "interesting" things, which are also allowable artistic material, are the every-day and insignificant happenings of uneventful life. So far as the claim of truth-telling is concerned, the argument lies rather with the "naturalist" than with the "realist." The simple fact is, however, that no novelist paints the real facts of any life. The obligation that rests upon him is to give a true picture of the life he professes to portray, and what he deems the truth depends on what he sees when he studies that life. To one, the inward struggles, aspirations, conflicts of a character—what he does as well as what he hopes to

do—may seem to be the real story; while another may regard his speculations about others, his doubts and worries over trifles, such as the fit of his trousers or the color of his necktie, to be the important realities of his career. On every novelist rests alike the same obligation of truth-telling. "Realist," "naturalist," "idealist," "romancist," only that, and nothing more, can be demanded of them—that they paint life as they see it, feel it, believe it to be. The only quarrel with the "realist" is that he assumes to limit and prescribe the domain of truth for the sake of magnifying his own artistic merit. The genuine article, he would have us believe, is only found in his own little garden. All that grows outside its narrow limits is taboo, and whoever dares to call it art is in danger of being cast into the fire of his own private and self-administered place of "realistic" punishment. Whatever is not fashioned on his own prescribed models is wholly and inconceivably bad. The past and the present are only meritorious as they approximate his standards.

This arrogant assumption has had the effect which successful arrogance always has upon modest aspiration. The American novelist has always been mortally afraid of international criticism, and, instead of being encouraged to follow the lead of his own inclination, he began at once to try to borrow an approved pattern for his work. These great underlying impulses, which really give character to the American people, and ought, therefore, to have given the keynote to our contemporary fiction—these he cast aside and began to study the trepidations, doubts, uncertainties, embarrassments and gaucheries of the afternoon call or the evening "full dress rehearsal," and to call this not only life, but the only and exclusive life that fiction is permitted to depict.

As a result of these things, acting in concert with other causes, we find that nearly thirty years after the eclipse of war, our imaginative literature shows little evidence of the strength, variety, nobility, and grandeur that characterized the epoch preceding the outbreak of rebellion. Its poetry is insignificant; its fiction cramped and petty; its criticism carping rather than appreciative; its spirit dubitant rather than hopeful, and its aim, excellence in the application of imported methods, rather than self-reliant attempts to create a literature not only national, but of that supreme excellence which the conditions of our life would seem to justify the world in expecting at our hands.

ALBION W. TOURGEE.

II.

DECADENCE OF SONG.

It is generally conceded that many passages of Wagner's operas are almost unsingable. The sequence of tones is not only strained and unnatural for the ear, but equally so for the voice. The result of this is an extraordinary wear on the powers; and when to this harsh progression of tones is added the difficulty of producing the voice under the limitations of the German tongue, the obstacles in the path of the singer become formidable. The Italian language is peculiarly adapted to the art of singing. In the development of this "soft bastard Latin," every hard sound was dropped and the language purified in its vocalism to a degree of unequalled smoothness. It is the preëminently liquid tongue, and its vowel sounds are the elementary tones of human speech. On the other hand, German has a number of mixed tones, such as those represented by the diphthongs *au* and *ei*, and the modified vowels *ü* and *ö*, which are extremely difficult to sing, except on notes easily produced. The best German singers mar their work by the bad production of notes accompanied by these vowel sounds, while singers of fairly good ability frequently shock the ears of cultured hearers.

Since this is the case in average music, it must obviously be worse in the Wagner music-dramas, because the great German did not give sufficient consideration to the powers of the human voice. The absence, for long spaces, in his scores, of any-